

**OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR**

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CARES Commission  
Department of Veteran Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20480

Re: Comments—VA Health Care in American Samoa

Dear Commissioners:

The Capital Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) initiative represents a meaningful and substantive step towards meeting the healthcare needs of the veteran population in American Samoa. Historically, the veterans of the Territory of American Samoa have been without the benefit of a locally situated VA center for medical services. Both the VA center in Honolulu, Hawaii and the veteran clientele in the Territory have been forced to make the best of this situation by transporting VA patients to Honolulu, Hawaii for primary, secondary and tertiary care and treatment, a distance of 2,600 miles. This is analogous to requiring that a VA beneficiary to travel from Los Angeles to New York City in order to access basic medical attention.

The prioritization of the VA Medical and Regional Office Center in Honolulu, Hawaii for a clinical presence in American Samoa, must be received with the appropriate weight and consideration for which the situation demands. American Samoa is a major recruiting center for the armed services per capita, and annually, no less than one-third of each graduating high school class (approximately 1,400 total) participates in an armed services branch recruitment program. Secondly, DOD's expansion of the Army Reserve Center in American Samoa, doubles the size of the former facility and, therefore, appropriately deployed numbers of combat, engineering and administrative personnel reside in the Territory without appropriate medical care available. The extension of reasoning here is that DOD experiences a high rate of enlisted, active duty people of Native American Samoa origin, and subsequently, generates a high number of potential VA enrollment clientele either through retirement or lesser years of service.

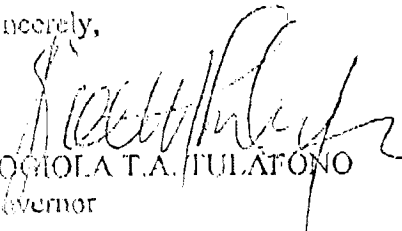
Having a VA clinical presence in American Samoa that is permanently located is a must in order to :

- a. provide cost effective (for both VA and clientele) medical attention for veterans in American Samoa; and
- b. meet a quality of care standard required by medical and administrative review boards for local medical services for veterans.

In mainland, Hawaii or Alaska jurisdictions, the situation that exists in American Samoa would never be tolerated by the administration and community at large. What criteria does one use to override or deny a basic benefit derived from having served the nation's armed forces? How does such criteria get applied to a whole community? Without a well-established presence in the Territory, how does the Administration know the real effects of such a policy of denial? How does a system understand the depth and breadth of a situation if one is not there to witness or record it? Does the Administration know the level of emigration of veterans from the Territory that can be attributed to the lack of these basic necessities in American Samoa for them? These are pressing concerns that can only be addressed when the VA is able to commit to creating a full time, permanent presence in the Territory of American Samoa.

We urge the Commission to support the work and initiatives of the VA Medical and Regional Office Center in Honolulu, Hawaii by approving a provision for a long term, permanent solution to meeting basic health care needs of the America's veterans of Native American Samoan origin or heritage that is sited in American Samoa.

Sincerely,



TOGIOLA T.A. TULAFONO  
Governor

cc: Honorable Senator Daniel Inouye  
Honorable Senator Daniel Akaka  
Honorable Congressman Faleomavaega Eni Hunkin